



## Pick Your Path to Health

### Bear Medicine for Our Children

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It's fall and the children have returned to school, or have just begun their formal education. They come home with a note saying their immunization records are not "up to date." The note lists a lot of words that are long, and unpronounceable or short and mysterious. "I thought that was all taken care of a long time ago!" mothers exclaim.

So did I, in fact, when I left Canada to settle in the United States. My daughter was six years old at the time and the school board said she wouldn't be able to start grade one until her immunization records were "up to date." I had this little yellow card that her doctor had given me at her first visit. By now it had a lot of chicken scratchings against jumbles of letters like DTaP and MMR. So I took it with me to the local board of health. "All I have to do is show them the card and we'll walk out of here." I assured my daughter who sat reading her book.

As it turned out, they didn't even want to see the card. They whisked my little one away from me, to a room down the hall, and stuck her like a pincushion. I'm sure everyone for a mile around could hear her wailing in protest. That's how I learned about childhood immunization in the United States. And I bet you that's how many of you learned as well.

Our legends tell of how the people discovered medicinal plants from animal guides sent by the Creator. In the Ojibwe legend, Nanaboozho'o appeared as a bear, (makwa) and showed us how to gather and prepare herbs to keep our bodies healthy and strong. However, Nanaboozho'o was also a trickster, known for weaving unpleasant surprises along with the good. This is how I tried to explain the harsh reality of needles and bitter liquid to my outraged daughter.

I told her, that for little bit of pain, she now had bear medicine flowing through her veins and it would make her as strong and fearless as a bear. While I don't think she bought the pain side of the story, she did absorb the bear side. A week later, and much to my dismay, she took on the class bully and won citing bear medicine as her advantage.

All of our children should grow up as strong as bears. But it is fact that they are being weakened and even killed by preventable diseases at a much greater rate than dominant culture children and even other minority children.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have described the situation in a document entitled, "Immunization for Native American Children." They also offer an easy strategy for eliminating the unnecessary risks faced by our children. You can read the document, yourself, by going to the following Web site, <http://www.aap.org/policy/re9856.html> or by asking your local library to get hold of the article from a journal called, Pediatrics, Vol. 104, No. 3, September 1999, pages 564-567.